

Father and Son

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[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)
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In memory of my father, Stephen Holbrook Beach

Last week I got a phone call from my grandson, Alec Beach. His mother must have helped him dial, but it was his bright, young voice that I heard first: "Don't be sad, Grandpa, about your father. He was very old, so don't you be sad." My father, Stephen Holbrook Beach, had died the day before, on Jan. 5. Alec's were the same consoling thoughts and good wishes that any adult might have expressed, though he is only 4½ years old. I've noticed his keen awareness of family members and relationships; for instance, speaking to Barbara or me about his father, he will say, "Your son..." On the phone, his mother explained that he had wanted to call me when he'd been told of his great-grandfather's death. He had seen my father only occasionally. But no matter: He knows and expresses his love to me; he also knows at first hand about fathers and sons. That relationship, as I have known it, I want to talk about today.

Perhaps the thought that his own parents could -- or some day would -- die had crossed Alec's mind. Perhaps sympathy mingles with dread in every human heart. His mother said he'd been asking about death ever since he asked me, some months ago, who was *my* mother, and I told him that she had died long before. I found a photo of her to show him, for I wanted him to have some sense of her as a real person, an individual.

By speaking of my father and of my relationship to him, I am, I trust, speaking in some ways of all fathers and sons, and perhaps also of parents and children, and even grandchildren and great-grandparents. So too I am speaking of the passing of generations, and how the continuities and the discontinuities we experience in these passages enter into and shape our lives. I am glad that Alec's life touched his great-grandfather's, however briefly. It brings to mind my own great-grandfather, John Boughton Beach, a Unitarian minister who graduated in 1861 from the Meadville Theological School, back when it was in Meadville, Pa. Looking at this succession of generations -- I count six -- the passage of time does not seem stretched so far or so thin, nor the link to past and future so tenuous. This puts my father and me squarely in the middle, links to those gone before and those coming after.

This is not the new year's topic I had said I would speak about today. But somehow, not speaking about my father today would have felt like ignoring or even avoiding what was foremost in my heart and mind. Word of his death came from my younger sister early Wednesday morning; she had been with him at the nursing home in Ohio when he died. He was 95, almost 96 years old. "I love you," he had said to her, and then peacefully slipped away. I think it is fair to say that, for him, death came as a release from a life that

had become physically and mentally vastly overburdened. I gave myself most of that day for mourning and remembering. We had foreseen this death when he was hospitalized a month ago, and my two sisters and I, with a few other family members, were together with him; that was our goodbye time, really, and our coming together, our relationship-renewing time. After that he rallied -- just enough, it seems, to get himself into the new millennium. On Friday, Jan. 21, we will be back at the West Shore Unitarian Universalist Church for his memorial service -- the church I grew up in from the time it was founded, in 1947, with my father and mother as charter members. This background information will help you understand the document my father wrote out, longhand, in 1989, titled "Instructions that I would like followed upon my death." This is what he said:

In case of a prolonged and obviously hopeless illness do not apply mechanical means to prolong my "life" when it becomes a burden to everyone including me. In short, pull the plug. The body is to be cremated. There is to be no "viewing" at an undertaker's or anywhere else.

A memorial service at the West Shore church is as much fuss as I would choose. I would like Kim to perform the service along with whoever is the minister there. Please dignify it by wearing robes and by good organ music. Anything that Bach wrote is agreeable but I do have an affection for Albinoni's Adagio in G minor. A single bouquet of flowers will suffice. If someone wants to give a token in my memory tell them to give it to a charity or the church memorial fund. Along with any readings you may choose I would like George Eliot's "The Choir Invisible" and that passage from Ecclesiastes which goes, "there is a time to love and a time to hate," etc.

If you consider it not too shocking, use Prospero's speech from Act IV, Scene 1 starting "Our revels now are ended," and ending "is rounded with a sleep." I've always liked it.

Don't go into a long-winded eulogy. I've heard some that made it difficult to understand who was being described. It would be acceptable for references to [my role in] the [West Shore] church founding and its presidency for its first three years, followed by a lot of other jobs. And, going back further, my service as president of the Richmond [Unitarian] church and that group's work at that time in founding the church in Charlottesville.

The question of disposition of ashes prompts a suggestion. I have always loved trees and have never wanted to live where they were scarce. When Virginia died I decided to plant a tree in her memory. Now there is a beautiful purple beech growing in Cahoon Park close to the Rose Hill museum [where she helped found Baycrafters and taught art classes]. Her ashes, spread about the roots when it was planted, have given it nourishment. It can be seen by hundreds of people each day. ... I hope that some similar solution can be found for my ashes, preferably a park where all sorts of people may see it and enjoy its shade and beauty.

This is all that I can think of except to say that I have been surrounded by beautiful people all my life. I have been most fortunate. I hope you and your families will also find the same experience.

Love to you all,
Stephen Holbrook Beach, or Sandy,
July 24, 1989.

I was conscious of a change in my relationship with my father, a few years ago -- not outwardly or dramatically, but inwardly, in tone and feeling. I feel reticent about it because it seems inconsiderate to speak now of anything but gratitude toward him and good feelings between us. But there's a point at which mere considerateness becomes avoidance. And I've made it my motto, increasingly as I grow older: An end to avoidance and evasion. When I no longer withheld my feelings from Dad, when I trusted that our bond was strong enough to take it, then I was freed to move into a new way of being together. So might any of us be freed.

Short of the long-winded eulogy he deplored, I could say many things in praise of my father. Much that I am he has given me, and I am thankful for his gifts. He was generous, accepting, non-judgmental. But he had no patience for whining. He did not shilly-shally but went straight to the point. I have never forgotten his saying to me, many years ago -- it may have been a quotation: "They do not honor their fathers who only imitate them." This was Dad, the Liberal with a capital L, speaking, ever open-minded toward change, ever tolerant of differences. The meaning I took from it was entirely personal: I had permission *not* to follow in his footsteps, but to be myself and seek my own path. I could honor my father without doing what he had done, or most importantly, without thinking what he had thought.

And I did not. He went to Case and became an engineer. I went to Oberlin and Harvard Divinity School and became a minister. Ah, but I stuck with my religious roots and even renewed the ancestral ministerial roots. He was a humanist, and I, with growing clarity, a theist. Well, we had some dialogues about that, and I think that subject might well come up here another day. At heart -- for the two of us, at least -- I suspect that the God question comes down to two angles of vision on the same ultimate reality.

I don't surely know, but maybe there's a down-side to open-mindedness. If you only say to another person, "Do your own thing," do you risk being heard as saying, "I don't care."? Is the underlying feeling: "I don't expect to influence you much. We're not all that connected."?

I think I felt the need to press my will against his, the kind of thing you act out in arm-wrestling. But he wouldn't do it. The word that always comes to mind when I think of my father is *genial*. He always had a good word, whatever the situation -- until it got to be too much. Only then, as my sisters and I would say, would he "bellow." "Hey, Dad's bellowing!" we would say to one another, not loud enough to provoke him further. But you see, we didn't feel seriously threatened, even then.

If this is a complaint, I know, it sounds like an odd one. I guess it is. Dad was always ready to smooth over a conflict. He never wanted to hear a complaint, a grief, a personal

trouble or a trial. He would have hated a large part, *this part*, of this sermon, even if it wasn't about him.

He was a devoted Unitarian. Going to church was the big thing in his week, every week, right to the end. I think he was glad to see me choose our ministry, as I did right out of college. He neither pushed it nor opposed it, when I decided that engineering was *not* my cup of tea (not, I concluded, if you had to do physics not with pulleys and inclined planes but with calculus). I was following my bliss, as Joseph Campbell would say, rather than imitating my father -- even though my "bliss," this ministry, felt scary to me at the time. I guess I was looking for a cheering section. So why didn't he cheer me on? *Why didn't he?*

Can you be angry at your father and still honor him? Can you be angry at your parents and still honor them? Yes, but it's more complicated.

My mother was my cheering section. I identified with my mother, the artist. Mother was always there, in my early years, while Dad was off on his almost weekly business trips. She said I looked like *her* father, and that I had his mannerisms. And yes, I had strong childhood memories of Grandpa Kimmich and working in his grocery store on Cleveland's Near West Side. Maybe it was Mother's worrying over things and her readiness to do combat that moved my father to learn the art of sweeping unpleasantnesses under the rug. Ours was a secure home. There was never any question in my mind of the solidity of my parents' union. But watching them, I wanted my father to fight back sometimes. And I wanted more ease, more happiness, less worries, less ... well, her premature death, now a quarter of a century ago, left me with a numb, silent sadness.

Do we ever grow up and stop being our parents' children? Do we ever cease wanting their support and approval? You'd think that eventually the answer would be yes. You'd think.

Years passed after my mother's death before I was ready to talk with my father about her. How many years, I no longer remember, but it was a long time. Her death had come too suddenly, and I felt cheated of the time I needed to say all that I wanted to say to her. We were living in Texas then, and I had talked with her by phone in the hospital, but I had not made the trip back to Cleveland while there was still time. Then, suddenly, the word came from Dad: She had died. I felt guilty and ashamed that I had not sensed how precarious her condition was, and deep down I blamed my father for not raising sufficient alarm about it.

As a result, my father and I grieved our silent griefs, separately from one another. My own grief returns on each great occasion within the family -- the weddings and the holiday reunion times. For I invariably think: She would have enjoyed being here, so much! I had always wanted more happiness for my mother.

Finally, though, I decided I must speak directly to my father about how I felt about Mother. What made me decide? Unacknowledged emotion erupted, taking me by surprise. One night, sitting on the end of the bed, tears suddenly overcame me. I didn't

know why, at first, but I sobbed. That was when I decided: I needed to talk with Dad about what I felt, as directly as possible -- that we might finish our unfinished and unshared grieving.

I got on a plane and went to Cleveland, by myself. It wasn't easy to pry open the past, so long smoothed over and kept out of view. But we did talk, in our halting, male way. Dad and I took a long walk together, that windy November day, out along Lake Erie to Cahoon Park. You know about this from his statement of last wishes, how he got permission to plant a tree in a certain spot in the park, and there planted a purple beech, with Mother's ashes scattered at the roots. With the passing years it has become a large, magnificent tree. I see it as a symbol of mercy, giving us leave to speak of things that for too long had been too little spoken between us.

Then we walked the long walk back -- to his home and my childhood home -- across the open fields, waiting for winter, yet being together as we had not been in a very long time. We talked of family memories, and father-and-son memories. I do not think my father was a different person from that time, nor was I, at least so far as anyone could notice. But between us, it was different, different in feeling and freedom, from that time forward.

In the end, only one thing counts, and that is friendship, the mutuality of feeling and freedom that two persons can share. This also transcends blood relations, and may sometimes transform them. So I want now to close with the words I wrote in memory of a friend and former parishioner in Austin, Texas, Janet McGaughey. Janet had transcribed for me some music by the contemporary Polish composer Henryk Gorecki. You have a copy appended to the order of service, as she herself penned it, interlaced with the words that I wrote, as a hymn, at the time of her death a few weeks ago:

*Our friend's farewell cuts deep the soil
Where souls root and prosper -- yielding peace.
Roots wither when denied, betrayed,
Live when kindness rains and brings release.
Friend of friends be present
In each gift of friendship!
We endure -- by your grace.*

Amen.